



## Third expulsion attempt fails as migrants in Albania returned to Italy



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An Italian navy ship on Saturday took migrants to Italy from asylum processing centers in Albania following a court decision in Rome. It was the third failed attempt by Giorgia Meloni's far-right government to process migrants in the non-EU country. A coast guard ship took 43 migrants from the port of Shengjin, 66 kilometers northwest of the capital, Tirana. They were among the 49 men who were transferred to Albania on an Italian naval ship Tuesday. Six were returned the same day for being minors or deemed vulnerable.

Italian media reported the men were from Bangladesh, Egypt, Ivory Coast and Gambia.

An Italian appeals court in Rome on Friday refused to approve the speedy expulsion of 43 asylum-seekers detained in Albania since Tuesday under a controversial migration deal to move the proceedings beyond European Union borders.

The court referred the case to the European Court of Justice, in Luxembourg, which is expected to issue a ruling on Feb. 25 related to the previous cases, in which the series of lower court rulings have opened a fissure between the Meloni government and the Italian judicial system.

In October and November, judges similarly refused to approve the expulsion of much smaller groups of migrants, seeking clarity from the European court on which countries were safe for repatriation of people whose asylum claims are rejected.

Italy last year signed a five-year agreement to process up to 3,000 migrants a month beyond EU borders as part of Meloni's program to combat illegal migration to Italy, which is the first landfall for tens of thousands of migrants who make the perilous journey across the central Mediterranean Sea.

While the agreement has raised concerns among human rights activists, European partners have expressed interest in the project.

In the first four weeks of this year, 3,704 migrants arrived in Italy, almost three times as many as in the same period last year. In the whole of last year, 66,317 migrants arrived in Italy, a drop of 58% from the previous year. The largest nationality was Bangladeshis, followed by Syrians, Tunisians and Egyptians, according to the Italian Interior Ministry